The “halo effect”: The effects of criminal offenders’ physical attractiveness

Maria Krani

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Introduction

It seems that physical attractiveness plays a significant role in how people are treated in a society. There are studies claiming that physical attractiveness can predispose the way we are treated in fields of social life like the workplace and school. Attractiveness may, also, have a considerable impact on who our friend and social circle encloses, how much attention and respect we command from others, and the way we are treated in our interpersonal relationships, in general. But what about the case of an attractive offender? How does physical attractiveness of an offender affect formal as well as informal social reaction? The current article attempts to examine the relation between a criminal offender’s physical attractiveness

and the way society as a whole reacts, under the prism of the “halo effect” theory.

The power of beauty and the “halo effect”

Facial attractiveness often increases someone’s pleasantness and encourages others to approach them more favorably. Individuals with attractive facial features are believed to have more positive personality traits. This constitutes a common stereotype known as “beauty-is-good,” which can exert significant influences on a variety of aspects in social life (Eagly et al., 1991, according to Yang et al, 2019).

Many psychologists have suggested that those individuals who possess attractive features are also often deemed to possess a great deal of positive traits, such as trustworthiness, intelligence, happiness, and success (Dion et al. 1972, Goldman and Lewis 1977, Wilson and Eckel 2006, according to Fraga, 2015, p. 5). “This phenomenon is commonly referred to as “what is beautiful is good,” or the “physical attractiveness bias” (Dion, et al. 1972, according to Fraga, 2015, p. 5). For sociologists this phenomenon is mostly referred to as “sexual or erotic capital” and it constitutes a new form of capital, which is associated with the benefits physical attractiveness ensures for a person (Green, 2008, p. 29).

At this point, it is essential that we discuss about the phenomenon of the “halo effect”. The “halo effect”, also known as “atmosphere effect” or “halo error” refers to the tendency of individuals to evaluate a person in a favourable or unfavourable manner, due to beliefs or evidence that an someone has positive characteristics that seem to overshadow all their other (maybe not as positive) traits (Roeckelein, 2006, p. 263). The “halo effect” is a cognitive prejudice, however, this familiarity exists primarily at

an unconscious level. In simple words, it is the tendency to judge someone's individual traits according to one's general feelings or affect toward them (Soper & Piepkorn, 2018, p. 1).

The halo effect is, in general, defined as the influence of a global evaluation on evaluations of individual attributes of a person. This definition is, often, imprecise as it is usually the outcome of general impressions or drawing conclusions about otherwise unknown attributes of a person**.** According to Nisbett and Wilson, "Global evaluations might color presumptions about specific traits or influence interpretation of the meaning or affective value of ambiguous trait information. Thus, if we like a person, we often assume that those attributes of the person about which we know little are also favorable" (1977, p. 250).

The effect can be recognised in both positive and negative directions. If the observer likes one aspect of someone or something, they will most likely have a positive predisposition toward everything about it/them. If the observer, on the other hand, dislikes one aspect of someone or something, they will have a negative predisposition toward everything about it/them. This effect, which is the exact opposite of the halo effect, is known as the "devil effect" (also known as the "horns effect'' and the "reverse halo effect"). In the opposite direction of the halo effect, the devil effect is when a person evaluates an individual based on a negative characteristic due to evidence or beliefs and then extends this unfounded evaluation until it overshadows the rest of their traits (Roeckelein, 2006, p. 263).

Taking everything into account, it seems that physical attractiveness can strongly benefit or harm individuals' opportunities and happiness throughout life, and from a preliminary overview it seems that the more attractive a person is, the easier it will be for them to succeed, be taken seriously, be respected and have more power through many paths of life. All in all, it seems that attractive individuals tend to be viewed more positively by others. (Wang, 2009, p. 2).

The halo effect during the procedure of trial

The existent literature indicates that like in any other social sector justice system's workers, such as the jury often rely on their own notions, subjective views and preconceptions. As a result, while dealing with criminal offenders they are likely to be influenced by a number of extra-legal factors, such as the defendant's gender, age, race and socio-economic status (Cannon, 2012, p. 5). One of those factors that are not directly relevant to a trial but may influence juror decision-making is an offender's physical attractiveness, as well (Lytle, 2015, p. 2).

According to Monahan, beautiful women are convicted less often of crimes they are accused of, and as Efran has demonstrated the Jury are more generous when punishing good-looking offenders in contrast to the unattractive ones (Monahan, 1941 & Efran, 1974, according to Sigall & Ostrove, 1975, p. 410). Furthermore, facial expression is one more factor that contributes to perceived physical attraction, and has been found to influence sentencing as well. Abel and Watters, use the variables of gender and facial expressions of defendants and hypothesized that smiling defendants would receive a less harsh sentence than non-smiling defendants. "Participants were provided with a vignette regarding a defendant charged with Driving Under the Influence (DUI) and were asked to act as jurors and assign sentencing to the defendant". The smiling male defendants were deemed as more attractive, overall by the participants as well as it appeared that the participants were more lenient to the smiling defendants (Abel & Watters, 2005, according to Kutys, 2012, p. 6).

So far it seems that there is a tendency toward leniency for an attractive offender, which can be interpreted in a number of ways. Essentially, the argument is whether beauty can lead to a relatively more positive affective response toward those who possess it. Research so far suggests that we like

an attractive person more, and likewise, liking for a defendant increases chances of leniency. In other words we would expect better-looking defendants to be punished less than unattractive defendants. “A more cognitive approach might attempt to explain the relationship between physical appearance and reactions to transgressions by assuming that the subject has a "rational" basis for his responses. It is reasonable to deal harshly with a criminal if we think he is likely to commit further violations, and as Dion's (1972) study suggests, unattractive individuals are viewed as more likely to transgress again” (Sigall & Ostrove, 1975 p. 411).

So do unattractive offenders get sentence more often and/or more harshly than those who are considered attractive and vice versa? Even though there is a tendency for more attractive people to receive more lenient treatment in court, Mazzella and Feingold observed that when the crimes are more brutal and heinous the evaluation is reversed and attractive defendants get longer sentences, part of which can explained by the feeling of being deceived by their attractiveness the jury might develop (Mazzella & Feingold, 1994, according to Beck, 2010, p. 15).

Even though there are findings that show tendency for more lenient treatment towards attractive perpetrators, there are also finding that contradict them. Consequently, there is still need for further research on the subject, as well as careful examination of the context and circumstances of the findings, before we can extract safe and reliable conclusions.

The case of Jeremy Meeks

One of the latest examples, of how physical attractiveness can affect people’s opinion about an offender, and thus the offender’s opportunities in

rehabilitation and leading a law abiding lifestyle, is probably the case of Jeremy Meeks.

Jeremy Meeks came to prominence as the 'Hot Felon' after his prison mugshot went viral after the Stockton Police Department posted it on Facebook. Even though the police is claimed to have characterized him as “one of the most violent criminals in the Stockton area,” he gained popularity due to his good looks (Freedom du Lac, 2015). Among many, his picture inspired nicknames such as "Mugshot McDreamy" as well as internet hashtags such as #FelonCrushFriday (Crimesider Staff, 2015).

He got arrested in 2014 on counts related to firearm possession, gang membership and probation violation, after the Stockton police stopped him and two others during a joint law enforcement gang sweep (Karimi, 2014). Later on it became known that he was already an ex convicted felon who had served 2 years in prison for a felony grand theft back in 2002 (Newman, 2017).

Jeremy Meeks, after going through trial in federal court, was sentenced to more than two years in prison. He was convicted of one count of being a felon in possession of a firearm and was given a 27-month prison sentence. Additionally, the judge also ordered Meeks to participate in the 500-Hour Bureau of Prisons Substance Abuse Treatment Program (Freedom du Lac, 2015).

Unlike other people who get released from prisons and have great difficulty and face doubts and labelling during their rehabilitation process, Jeremy Meeks was almost immediately offered great job opportunities due to his looks and popularity. Upon his release from prison Meeks began a modeling career. Thanks to the attention he attracted on the Internet, Meeks entered the world of high fashion and debuted as a fashion model by walking in the Philipp Plein show during New York Fashion Week (Lang, 2017).

Conclusion

It is rather apparent that physical attractiveness often possesses an essential part in the aspect of social interactions, especially when it comes to judging and evaluating a person we know little about. In the field of social sciences, this phenomenon is known as the "halo effect", and as research shows it mostly works in an unconscious level. As far as the "halo effect" in relation to the criminal justice system is concerned, there are research findings that show a significant tendency of treating attractive perpetrators more leniently. However, there are also findings that contradict the latter. As a result we assume that there is still need for further research on the subject, accompanied by careful examination of the context and circumstances of the research findings. Overall, we deem necessary for physical attractiveness be combined with other extra-legal variables that can affect a trial's verdict, while examining the phenomenon of the halo effect within the criminal justice system.

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